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THE EXPEDITION TO ST. MARY'S RIVER.

OFFICIAL REPORT OF COL. HIGGINSON.

ON BOARD STEAMER BEN DEFORD,
February 14, 1863.

B. i. Gen. R. SAATON, Military Governor, &c.

General:—I have the honor to report the safe return of the expedition under my command, consisting of four hundred and sixty-two officers and men of the first regiment South Carolina Volunteers, who left Beaufort on January 23d, on board the steamers *John Adams*, *Planter* and *Ben Deford*.

The expedition has carried the regimental flag and the President's Proclamation far into the interior of Georgia and Florida. The men have been repeatedly under fire, have had infantry, cavalry, and even artillery arrayed against them, and have in every instance come off not only with unblemished honor but with undisputed triumph.

At Township, Florida, a detachment of the expedition fought a cavalry company, which met us unexpectedly on a midnight march through pine woods, and which completely surrounded us. They were beaten off with a loss on our side of one man killed and seven wounded, while the opposing party admits twelve men killed, (including Lieut. Jones, in command of the Company,) besides many wounded. So complete was our victory that the enemy scattered and hid in the woods all night not returning to his camp, which was five miles distant, until noon the next day, a fact which was unfortunately unknown until too late to follow up our advantage. Had I listened to the urgent appeals of my men and pursued the flying enemy, we could have destroyed his camp; but in view of the darkness, his uncertain numbers and swifter motions, with your injunctions of caution, I judged it better to rest satisfied with the victory already gained.

On another occasion a detachment of about two hundred and fifty men on board the *John Adams* fought its way forty miles up and down a river regarded by the naval commanders as the most dangerous in the department—the St. Mary's—a river left untraversed by the gunboats for many months, as it requires a boat built like the *John Adams* to ascend it successfully. The stream is narrow, swift and winding, and bordered at many places with high bluffs, which blazed with rifle shots. With our glasses, as we approached these points, we could see mounted men by the hundred, galloping through the woods from point to point to await us; and though fearful of our shot and shell, they were so daring against musketry that one rebel actually sprang from the shore upon the large boat which was towed at our stern, where he was shot down by one of my sergeants. We could see our shell scatter the rebels as they fell among them, and some terrible execution must have been done; but not a man of this regiment was killed or wounded, though the steamer is covered with bullet marks, one of which shows where our brave Captain Clifton, commander of the vessel, fell dead beside his own pilot house, shot through the brain

by a minie ball. Major Strong, who stood beside him, escaped as if by magic, both of them being unnecessarily exposed without my knowledge. The secret of our safety was in keeping the regiment below, except the gunners; but this required the utmost energy of the officers, as the men were wild to come on deck, and even implored to be landed on shore and charge on the enemy.

Nobody knows anything about these men who has not seen them in battle. I find that I myself knew nothing. There is a fiery energy about them beyond anything of which I have ever read, unless it be the French Zouaves. It requires the strictest discipline to hold them in hand. During our first attack on the river, before I got them all formed below, they crowded at the open ends of the steamer, loading and firing with inconceivable rapidity, and shouting to each other "never give it up!" When called into the hold, they actually fought each other for places at the few port holes from which they could fire on the enemy. Meanwhile the black gunners, admirably trained by Lieutenants Stockdale and O'Neil (both being accomplished artillerymen) and Mr. Heron of the gunboat, did their duty without the slightest protection and with great coolness, amid a storm of shot.

This river expedition was not undertaken in mere bravado. Capt. Sears, U. S. A., the constructor of Fort Clinch, had urged upon the War Department to endeavor to obtain a large supply of valuable bricks, said to remain at the brick-yards, thirty miles up the St. Mary's, from which Fort Clinch was originally supplied. The War Department had referred the matter to Col. Hawley, who approved my offer to undertake the enterprise. Apart from this it was the desire of Lieutenant Hughes, U. S. N., commanding the U. S. steamer *Mohawk*, now lying at Fernandina, to obtain information regarding a rebel steamer, the *Borosa*, said to be lying still farther up the river, awaiting an opportunity to run the blockade. Both objects were accomplished. I brought away all the bricks and ascertained the *Borosa* to be worthless.

I have the honor to state that I have on board the *Ben Deford*, 250 tons of the best new railroad iron, valued at \$5,000 and much needed in this department. This was obtained on St. Simon's and Jekyll Islands, Georgia, from abandoned rebel forts, a portion of it having been previously blown up and collected by Captain Steedman of the *Paul Jones*. I have also eight large sticks of valuable yellow-pine lumber, said to be worth \$700, which came from St. Mary's, Georgia. There is also a quantity of rice, resin, cordage, oars, and other small matters, suitable for army purposes. On board the *John Adams* there is a flock of sheep from Woodstock, Florida. I have turned over to Captain Sears about 30,000 large-sized bricks, valued at about a thousand dollars, in view of the present high freights. I have also turned over to Judge Latta, civil Provost Marshal at Fernandina, four horses, four steers, and a quantity of agricultural implements suitable for Mr. Helper's operations at that location.

I have seen with my own eyes, and left behind for want of transportation (and because brick was even more valuable) enough of the choicest Southern lumber to load five steamers like the *Ben Deford*—an amount estimated at more than a million feet, and probably worth at Hilton Head, \$50,000. I also left behind, from choice, valuable furniture by the houseful—pianos, china, &c., all packed up

for transportation as it was sent inland for safe keeping. Not only were my officers and men forbidden to take any of these things for private use, but nothing was taken for public use save articles strictly contraband of war. No wanton destruction was permitted, nor were any buildings burned, unless in retaliation for being fired upon, according to the usages of war. Of course no personal outrage was permitted or desired.

At Woodstock I took six male prisoners, whom I brought down the river as hostages, intending to land part of them before reaching Fernandina and release them on parole. But in view of the furious attacks made upon us from the banks, this would have seemed an absurd stretch of magnanimity, and by the advice of Col. Hawley, I have brought them for your disposal.

At the same place we obtained a cannon and a flag, which I respectfully ask permission for the regiment to retain. We obtained also some trophies of a different description, from a slave jail, which I shall offer for your personal acceptance: three sets of stocks of different structure, the chains and staples used for confining prisoners to the floor, and the key of the building. They furnish good illustrations of the infernal barbarism against which we contend.

We return at the appointed time, although there are many other objects which I wish to effect, and our rations are not near exhausted. But the *Ben Deford* is crowded with freight, and the ammunition of the *John Adams* is running low. Capt. Hallet, of the *Ben Deford*, has been devoted to our interest, as was also, until his lamented death, the brave Captain Clifton.

Of the *Planter* I have hitherto said nothing, as her worn-out machinery would have made her perfectly valueless but for the laborious efforts of Captain Eldridge, and her engineer, Mr. Baker, aided by the unconquerable energy of Capt. Trowbridge, of Company A, who had the command on board. Thanks to this they were enabled during our absence up the St. Mary's to pay attention to the salt-works along the coast. Finding that the works at King's Bay, formerly destroyed by this regiment, had never been rebuilt, they proceeded five miles up Crooked River, where salt works were seen. Capt. Trowbridge, with Capt. Rogers, of Co. F, and thirty men, then marched two miles across a marsh, drawing a boat with them, and destroyed the works. There were twenty-two large boilers, two storehouses, a large quantity of salt, two canoes, with barrels, vats and all things appertaining.

I desire to make honorable mention not only of the above officers, but of Major Strong, Captains James (Co. B), Randolph (Co. C), Metcalf (Co. G), and Dolly (Co. H). Indeed, every officer did himself credit, so far as he had opportunity, while the cheerfulness and enthusiasm of the men made it a pleasure to command them.

We found no large number of slaves anywhere, yet we brought away several whole families and obtained by their means the most reliable information. I was interested to observe that the news of the President's Proclamation produced a marked effect upon them, and in one case it was of the greatest service to us in securing the hearty aid of a guide who was timid and distrustful until he heard he was legally free, after which he aided us gladly and came away with us.

[Concluded on Fourth page.]